

Lessons From the Practice

Victor

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Victor was already in his mid-80s when he was brought to me by his wife and daughter. He had been a Danish champion boxer in his early days and then had become a sea captain serving the United States government during war-time. He spoke Danish, English, and Spanish fluently and was the kind of upbeat person most people enjoy. Over about a five-year period, his infirmity increased slowly, and he followed the common route from wheelchair to bed.

I attended his medical needs every month by calling on him at his residence. Later, he was in a home where he was one of two people being cared for by a fine Greek lady. They got along well, but Victor started to lose contact with others for days or weeks at a time, and then, suddenly, he would be able to make coherent and relevant remarks again. He was always kind and as cheerful as anyone could be under those circumstances.

One day, the Greek lady called to say that she thought Victor was dying and asked me to come over.

Victor was neatly tucked in bed, and the room was clean and pleasant. He opened his eyes after I had stood there for a moment, and I said hello. He responded appropriately in Spanish, and I surmised that he was in a good mood and connected to the real world again.

I checked him over and then simply asked him if there was anything that I could do for him. There was a very long pause, and I thought maybe he had slipped out of touch again. But that was not the case.

Victor turned his head, looked squarely at me, and slowly

and distinctly said in English, "Take very good care of yourself!"

In his dying hours, Victor turned the tables on me and concerned himself with my well-being and future. I believe Victor liked me as I did him, and, when he knew there was nothing more that could be done for him, he responded very much like a loving parent. He gave the best advice this physician has ever received.

I took Victor's advice and better controlled my hours and activities. Then, about five years afterward, having completed 35 years of general practice, I turned my patients over to another physician and started a long sabbatical. Mine is not a retirement in the absolute sense—I have been doing locum tenens in Native American clinics in California and truly enjoying the experience. I am able to balance the time for family, recreation, and profession.

All this may have come about without Victor's advice, but his were not idle words.

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"Lessons From the Practice" presents a personal experience of practicing physicians, residents, and medical students that made a lasting impression on the author. These pieces will speak to the art of medicine and to the primary goals of medical practice—to heal and to care for others. Physicians interested in contributing to the series are encouraged to submit their "lessons" to the series' editors.

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